

Portland Yacht Club

A History of Cruising Activity

The Portland Yacht Club traces its routes to a weekend cruise to Boothbay Harbor by several Portlanders in the mid 1860's. This venture was the impetus that began a discussion about forming a yacht club. This was followed by a meeting in June 1868, at which time they decided if they could sign 100 members they would move forward. On April 26, 1869 their initiative was rewarded with the creation of the Portland Yacht Club.

During the first year, the club held another cruise to Boothbay Harbor. Departing Boothbay, they went up the Sasanoa (hopefully with the tide) to Bath. The next day they sailed down the Kennebec River (again hopefully with a fair tide) to Jewel Island where “a Grand Clam Bake” was held. The entire three day cruise was enshrouded in fog and supposedly continued for the next 34 years (some things never change).

But, think of the seamanship and navigation skills required to ply those waters in a vessel with no power other than the wind while using less than reliable charts, compass, watch and taffrail log. Present day cruisers are now quite spoiled with the electronics available.

In 1873 the club held both a spring and fall cruise along with 30 boats participating in Portland's July 4th Celebration.

The spring cruise of 1879 included 4 schooners and 2 sloops. They departed the club at 1000 and arrived in Wiscasset at 1620. The sloop Vif went aground on Merrill's Ledge in the Sheepscot. As the saying goes, “There are two types of sailors in Maine, those that have been aground and those that will go aground”. Members attended church services ashore the following day (14 Methodists and 16 Episcopalians) with Vespers held that Sunday evening on the Commodore's yacht. Doesn't quite sound like current cruises, unless a Blood Mary suffices as going to services.

The next several years brought kindly and pleasant cruising to many places including Quahog Bay, Long Cove and South Freeport. However, the most favored cruising anchorage was Pott's Harbor which boasted bowling alleys ashore. Larger and faster yachts always held up outside the harbor until the slower vessels caught up and the entire fleet would enter the harbor together.

It was not unusual for the Commodore to have an orchestra on his flagship while other boats might have banjo playing and/or singing groups rowing throughout the fleet serenading all.

In 1879, the club was visited by 137 yachtsmen representing 8 “foreign” yacht clubs. The

following year visits by “foreign” clubs increased to 109 vessels including eight steamers. Even in the late 1800's the beauty of the Maine coast was recognized by “those from away.”

In 1890 Portland Yacht Club joined with a club from Rockland, MA for a joint cruise. However, it was noted that yachting interest was on the wain as a report of the Regatta Committee stated that “the yachting season of the Portland Yacht Club has been entirely devoid of interest.”

The cruising interest of PYC is a significant pillar of the organization. This is substantiated by the following quote taken from an 1895 report:

“Racing has never been the primary design of the Portland Yacht Club. Other clubs are forced, from sheer monotony, to cultivate this spirit; but, we who have at our doors a coast that attracts all the yacht clubs of the Atlantic states, have been blessed and handicapped by our environment. Our shores present too great a charm in the pleasure of coasting.”

Records also indicate that the spring cruise usually held the last week in May had always been run in bad weather and fog. Again, some things never change.

With the advent of the Spanish American War, the harbor was closed. To dissuade anyone from broaching this rule the club received notice that any yacht that tried to venture out would have her sails shot full of holes. Now that is motivation to stay in port.

Cruising interest began to wane again as “commercialism which is so rife today that many of the club members with larger yachts began to charter them for the season, thus removing these boats from all club activities.”

In the 1890's, there were complaints of overcrowding in Maine waters as evidenced by the Commodore Bray's log entry while in Christmas Cove:

“Christmas Cove is the same beautiful place, but has lost its attractiveness, in a large degree, for the mob that is there with their unlimited cheek and yells. Years ago the attraction of Christmas Cove was due to the fact that one felt, when there, removed from all the bustle, really isolated from the world, but now the air is filled with cat calls and yells such as one might hear in Hell. Lights out at 2330.”

I wonder what this individual would think if he looked out at the Falmouth anchorage of today or spent a weekend at The Goslings.

In 1891, the annual cruise went to Christmas Cove despite the overcrowding. Hopefully, PYC members were not involved in the “cat calls and yells,” but I somehow doubt it.

On the return trip the waters off Seguin were quite rough and two stools on Commodore Bray's steam yacht Maitland were thrown through a closed pilot house window. In addition, the Fleet Surgeon had to administer a "quinine and cholera" mixture to several members.

In 1905, the spring cruise was moved to June 16th in hopes of better weather. Seventeen yachts left on that date, and it was the first time in 35 years that the weather was favorable. That year's cruise took them to Pott's Harbor, Boothbay and Winnegance. One log reported that "the Juno joined the cruise at the start and each night thereafter anchoring just astern of the flagship, though not a member and not invited." Seas were such that another log reported that a guest had the unfortunate experience of "unswallowing." Seems like a more genteel word than "ralphing."

The Boston Yacht Club visited PYC during its annual summer cruise also.

The records from 1905 to 1910 are missing. However, the 1910 cruise was held and visited Pott's Harbor and Mackerel Cove. One members log notes (with some sarcasm) that:

"In Mackerel Cove a native gave a demonstration of how to sink a yacht tender by ramming it with a Hampton boat under power."

During the early 1900's the advent of power boats and automobiles caused a loss of interest in sailing. For the first time power boats outnumbered sailboats. In 1918, the only water activity was a cruise comprised of sixteen power boats and one lone sailboat. While navigating up the New Meadows River the sailboat lost its topsail and bowsprit on a wire strung across the river. For the remainder of the cruise it was towed by one of the power boats.

World War I brought boating activities to a standstill. All but one sailboat remained on the hard. And, in 1916 a power boat named "Chicken" never ventured beyond Bug Light.

Again the records from 1926-1938 were lost. In addition all memorabilia, half hulls and trophies were lost in a fire that started at 0158 on August 10, 1926. The next two decades brought an increased interest in racing with several one design classes. Cruising began to take a back seat.

Then in 1940 the harbor was again closed for World War II, and the club house was leased to the Coast Guard. Boating activity virtually came to a standstill. For the next 16 years there is little record of cruising activities. However, racing had taken hold in one designs and smaller boats such as Turnabouts and Lightnings.

For the first time in many years in 1956 a cruise was held to the Basin. This was received so well, that a second cruise ensued later that summer to Quahog Bay.

However, racing was the primary focus of the club for the next two decades. Many one design classes existed (Lightnings, Ensigns, Etchells and J-24's) with annual races hosted by clubs along the entire Maine coast.

For much of this time the annual club cruise became a weekend event to High Head with the Commodore's cocktail party a central part of Saturday evening's festivities.

While returning from this event in the late '70's Walter and Polly Savage on Marmaduke struck a sunken dory off Sand Island on the eastern side of Chebeague, holing the boat. Walter's quick thinking of going full throttle allowed him to lift the bow above the gaping hole and beach her on Sand Island. Assisted by this author on his Mako 22, much of Marmaduke's gear, equipment, crew and standard poodle were off-loaded to Ward Graffam's Windy II. Unfortunately, the incoming tide overtook Marmaduke, and she was a total loss.

In 1980, Dave Semonite volunteered to renew cruising interests. He organized a one week cruise along the coast that was enjoyed by many sail and power boats. Bill McLeod followed Dave's lead the following year.

In 1982 a new Board position of Cruise Chairman was created replacing the Power Committee. In the 1960's and 1970's this Committee ran predicted log events on a weekly basis. But by the late 70's power boating continued to wain , in part due to the oil embargo of 1974. In 1981 this committee's only responsibilities were to act as race committee for the Thursday night regattas and Patrol vessels at the start of the Monhegan. These duties were shifted to volunteers.

1982 saw the first recorded two week cruise. It included anchorages at Christmas Cove, Tenant's Harbor, Seal Bay, Northeast and Southwest Harbors, Pretty Marsh, and Sebasco with several lay-days for the 25 participating yachts to chose their own favorite spots.

A Captain of the Day was responsible for colors at 0800 and sunset with the shotgun passed from Captain to Captain. Having Chaired that Committee in its first year, I can say that this practice was not always enjoyed by other yachts who were not prepared for the blast.

The highlight of the two weeks was a splendid evening on the ramparts of the fort in Castine where the Commodore's cocktail party was held. The merriment then continued at Admiral Brennan's house and then back to the yachts.

As I entered Seal Cove on Fox Island Thorofare, I spied Pot-O-Gold with a severe port list. I approached carefully and asked Lindsay Lord if all is well. He wryly said he was testing Lindsay's Law to see if still held true. "If the draft of your boat exceeds the depth of the water, by God you are surely aground."

The two week cruise format has continued through the present time including distant destinations of Roque Island, St. John River, NB, and Cape Cod. These cruises have been supplemented with weekend jaunts to Quahog Bay, Richmond Island, The Basin, Sebasco and other delightful anchorages. In addition, several years have seen the addition of a one week fall cruise.

As of this writing, the Portland Yacht Club is well balanced in Cruising, Racing, Social and Junior activities allowing all members the ability to pursue one or many interests.

Note: Much of this information was gleaned from Ralph Gould's 1869-1960 history as well as the authors personal memories since 1976.

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